

1-1-1995

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Recommended Citation

Sanford, Barry (1995) "Using the Lectionary," *Leaven*: Vol. 3: Iss. 4, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol3/iss4/7>

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Using the Lectionary

by Barry K. Sanford

Introduction to the Lectionary

A lectionary is simply a list of Scripture passages intended for systematic reading over a period of time. While a lectionary could be employed to guide private reading, lectionaries are really designed for liturgical reading in public worship. We in the Churches of Christ are not really a liturgical tradition; while we hold scripture in high regard, scripture *reading* among us has usually been subsumed to *preaching*. In liturgical traditions the reading of scripture holds its own place in the worship because of an underlying theological rationale. A Roman Catholic resource explains, "In the readings, explained by the homily, God is speaking to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and nourishing their spirit; Christ is present to the faithful through his own word."¹ The theology is that a *service* of grace, of spiritual feeding, is rendered to the people by the very reading of the Word. This reflects the root meaning of liturgy as "service." Liturgy is from the Greek word *leitourgia*, a New Testament word found for instance in Hebrews 10:11 where it speaks of the *service* rendered by the priest in offering the people's sacrifices to God.

There have been and are many lectionaries in existence, but in most contexts today references to the lectionary envision the Revised Common Lectionary. Abingdon Press publishes a volume entitled **The Revised Common Lectionary**² which is arguably the lectionary proper, but the same lectionary is presented in many other sources.³ It is incorporated in some religious calendars designed

for ministers. It is presented in whole or in part in aids⁴ that are keyed to the lectionary, and it is reflected in periodicals dedicated to homiletics such as **Preaching** and **Homiletics**.⁵

If the lectionary is nothing but a list of scriptures, it is difficult to see how anything could be more "biblical." Yet there is more to be said about the lectionary than this.

History of the Lectionary

Lectionaries are used in Judaism today, but not the **Revised Common Lectionary**, for the simple reason that Judaism rejects the Christian canon. There is historical evidence for the use of lectionaries in Judaism at least as far back as the fourth century of our common era. Before that, the origin of lectionary usage among Jews is not known, but scholars place it after (but not long after) the rise of the synagogue. In fact the need for a forum in which to read and propagate the Hebrew scriptures was probably one of the impulses leading to the development of the synagogue. It is not certain that there was a *fixed* order of readings (a lectionary) for Sabbath and festival days in the time of Christ, but it is not improbable. Two New Testament passages are relevant. Luke recorded:

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to

him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . ." (Luke 4:16-17, NIV)

Was the scroll of Isaiah randomly selected by the synagogue official, or was it called for by a lectionary? Was the passage left to Jesus, or was he turning to the lectionary text for that day, perhaps guided by some marginal notation? Did Jesus even time his homecoming to coincide with this passage which he knew, from a lectionary, was scheduled for that day?

The second passage is Acts 13:14-15:

On the Sabbath day [Paul and his companions] went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the officials of the synagogue sent them a message . . .

Were those readings from the law and the prophets specified by a lectionary? We cannot answer any of these questions with certainty, but one fact seems incontrovertible: liturgical reading of the Hebrew scriptures (whether regulated by lectionaries or not) was a feature of first century synagogue worship.

It is probable that the earliest Christians mirrored synagogue practice in the matter of reading Scripture in their assemblies. In fact 1 Timothy 4:13 (NIV) says, "Give attention to the *public* reading of scripture. . . ." But even if liturgical reading was a feature of first century Christian worship, we still cannot be sure the readings were actually governed by lectionaries. Manuscript evidence, however, proves the use of lectionaries relatively early in Christian history. We find the lectionary evidence in two forms. The earlier form consisted simply of markings in the margins of the biblical scrolls, often with pairings of the Greek words *arche* (beginning) and *telos* (end). The later form of lectionary evidence are volumes that contain the lectionary texts written out and duly identified for the intended date of use. Most of these (which constitute one of the major categories of textual witnesses in the higher criticism) are relatively late, but a few dozen leaves date to the fourth century.

Lectionary readings have historically been organized two ways. One contained continuous readings whereby one Sunday's reading picked up where the previous Sunday's left off. The other revolved around the Christian calendar. Specific passages were assigned by content to specific Sundays or holidays, with no regard for continuity from week to week. By this system, the birth narratives were read at Christmas, the resurrection narratives at Easter, and so

forth.

The lectionary books were organized according to contents. One type was *prophetologion* lectionaries, containing principally the prophets, but also some texts from other Old Testament books. The second type was *evangelarium* lectionaries, comprising the Gospels. The third type was *apostolos* lectionaries, comprising Acts and the New Testament epistles, but never the Apocalypse.⁶

By the fifth century a basic binary structure to Christian worship seems to have been in place: (1) the liturgy of the Word and (2) the liturgy of the Eucharist. The liturgy of the Word consisted of:

- The Old Testament reading (the so-called "first reading")
- The singing or chanting of a Psalm (the so-called "gradual")
- The New Testament epistle (the so-called "second reading")
- The Gospel (the high point of the liturgy of the Word)
- The homily (usually a sermonic exposition of the Gospel)

In the Protestant era, Luther, Calvin and Cranmer all continued the use of lectionaries and liturgical readings in their respective traditions, but the English Puritans rejected lectionaries along with every other vestige of liturgical worship.⁷

The story of the modern **Revised Common Lectionary**,⁸ however, seems properly to begin with Vatican II which decreed, "Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. . . . The liturgical books are to be revised as soon as possible; experts are to be employed in this task and bishops from all parts of the world are to be consulted."⁹ The result was the 1969 publication of a table of readings, the new lectionary for the Mass.¹⁰ This lectionary was based on a three-year cycle and each week specified three readings (an Old Testament text, a New Testament epistle, and a Gospel text), plus a text from Psalms (which technically is not a reading, but is meant to be sung or chanted by the people as a response to the Old Testament reading.)¹¹

The perceived excellence of the Catholic lectionary is evident in the fact that the Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Disciples, and United Church of Christ all adopted it for their own use, making certain adaptations (such as substitutions for the Apocryphal texts).¹² The resulting situation was both confusing and embarrassing; confusing because there were now five lectionaries in circulation, all similar but none identical, and embarrassing because the proliferation of discordant denominational versions was contradictory to the spirit of

ecumenism.

In 1978 an international ecumenical committee known as "The Consultation on Common Texts" commissioned a task force to develop a consensus

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lectionary.¹³ The basic calendar and structure of the 1969 Roman lectionary was assumed as the basis for their work. The result was the 1983 **Common Lectionary**. The **Common Lectionary** was experimental from its inception, and in 1986 a task force began work on a revision, taking into consideration the numerous suggestions and criticisms that had been voiced over the years. This resulted in the 1992 release of the (aptly named) **Revised Common Lectionary**.

In the **Revised Common Lectionary**, Year A features Matthew; Year B features Mark; and Year C features Luke, presented semi-continuously.¹⁴ The Gospel of John gets coverage from time to time during the three year cycle, particularly during Lent and Easter. There are four texts listed for every Sunday: (usually) an Old Testament text, a Psalm, a New Testament epistle, and a Gospel text.

The Christian Calendar

The Christian calendar is the backbone of the lectionary. The church year is a Christian view of time,¹⁵ re-telling the story of Christ through the cycle of the year and the Christian holidays. All time is God's time, but twice each year God is thought to break into this ordinary time with seasons of extraordinary time centered around Christmas and Easter.

The Christmas season consists of two parts. The first is Advent, which begins four Sundays before

Christmas Day. The first Sunday of Advent is considered the Christian New Year, and the religious theme of Advent is preparation for the celebration of Jesus' birth and preparation for his return. The second part is Christmastide, which begins on Christmas Day and lasts twelve days until January 6, known as Epiphany. Christmas and the ensuing days celebrate the birth of Jesus, and Christmas is considered the second most sacred day of the Christian year. Epiphany, so-named from the Greek word *epiphanos* meaning "manifestation," originally was connected with the visit of the magi¹⁶ (being an occasion when Jesus' identity was manifest by the star, etc.) but came to be associated with Jesus' baptism (being another occasion when Jesus' identity was manifest by God's acclamation, "This is my Son"). After Epiphany, ordinary time resumes until the Easter season.

The Easter season also comprises two parts. The first is Lent,¹⁷ which begins on Ash Wednesday, forty weekdays and six Sundays before Easter Sunday. The religious ideas of Lent are repentance, self-examination and preparation for Easter. Properly speaking, Lent lasts until Easter Sunday, but it is overlapped by Holy Week. Holy Week begins the Sunday before Easter, known as Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. Palm Sunday commemorates the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem the last week of his life, but in order to create an occasion to specifically focus on the death of Jesus, more recently this Sunday has been interpreted as Passion Sunday. Thursday of Holy Week is known as Maundy Thursday,¹⁸ commemorating the Lord's Supper. The following day is Good Friday, commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus. Saturday is the Easter Vigil. Easter Sunday celebrates the resurrection of Jesus and is considered the most sacred day of the Christian year.¹⁹ Easter marks the beginning of the second part of the Easter season, Eastertide, which lasts fifty days until Pentecost. Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit and the mission of the church. After Pentecost, ordinary time resumes until Advent.

The lectionary is keyed to and governed by the church year. During ordinary time the readings from both Old and New Testaments generally run semi-continuously with no thematic unity between them. During the Christmas and Easter seasons, continuity gives way to thematic unity based on the Gospel texts and the events commemorated by the season.

Implications, Benefits and Liabilities of Lectionary Usage²⁰

If the lectionary is followed, the issue of our observance of such days as Christmas and Easter immediately arises. The fundamental questions are

whether this re-presentation of the story of Jesus through the year has any authority in scripture or value to God's people. These are theological and hermeneutical issues. It is evident that a command or example of the nascent church formally observing Christmas and Easter is not to be found in scripture (Acts 12:4 in the King James Version notwithstanding). But if liberty for such is found in Romans 14:5-6, it is difficult to imagine that the memorializing of Jesus' life poses any threat to the welfare of the Church. But if a minister or church prefers to avoid all matters connected with Christmas and Easter, the lectionary can still be useful during other times of the year in many ways.

While the benefits (and liabilities) of lectionary usage are subjective matters, perhaps the single greatest potential benefit of lectionary usage is better preaching. For preachers, the lectionary is a ready-made, three-year preaching plan. Advance planning allows for sermon incubation, and well-prepared sermons are easier to deliver and probably easier to hear. The preacher is relieved of the burden of finding a text for Sunday.

Regular use of the lectionary will force the minister to proclaim a varied and balanced diet from the Word. The lectionary presents exposure to a wide variety of contexts, themes, characters and topics. It presents opportunities for coverage of entire books. Generally the lectionary texts are texts of major importance. There is a natural tendency (often unconscious) for the preacher to preach texts he likes and to avoid texts that are difficult to preach or problematic in their content. The lectionary is a safeguard against preaching that which is biased by the preacher's personal predilections. Lectionary preaching will help the preacher avoid fighting his personal battles from the pulpit. If the church knows of the minister's regular lectionary usage, everyone knows how and why a controversial or sensitive passage comes up.

If a sermon begins in the lectionary, then it has a biblical foundation. There is no guarantee that the preacher will develop his sermon faithfully from that base, but a biblical beginning surely enhances the chances of a biblical ending.

Lectionary preaching will probably result in more Christ-centered sermons. The weekly Gospel text will often hold the best sermonic possibilities, and this is potentially the most revolutionary consequence of lectionary usage among us.

The lectionary usually forces the preacher to study because the sermonic potential of a text will not always be immediately obvious, nor may the text be one he has preached before. The lectionary safeguards against homiletic laziness and over-reliance

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on old material. The preacher is challenged to apply his skills to craft a fresh sermon from that portion of God's Word handed to him by the lectionary.

The preacher will find an array of books, periodicals and other helps keyed to the lectionary. These often provide great intellectual and spiritual stimulation. These aids usually also suggest appropriate outlines, illustrations, prayers, hymns, responsive readings and litanies.

In many communities, the preacher can easily find groups of ministers meeting weekly to discuss the lectionary texts. Such generally comprise ministers from diverse traditions (there are probably few Church of Christ lectionary groups in existence). A preacher may find many serendipitous benefits from this association.

Many ministers organize a small group of interested persons within the congregation to discuss the lectionary texts in advance of his sermon preparation. From these the minister often gains insights and information about the lives of his congregation and the problems they face. Participants in such groups generally become highly invested in the preaching process.

The lectionary can be used for worship planning, to give thematic unity to the Sunday service. Worship planners can work well in advance. The lectionary will probably foster more and better public reading of scripture. If the Psalms are used as they are intended, new horizons open for our singing, as well as multiplied opportunities for responsive readings.

The lectionary can be the textual basis for Bible classes or small group studies. In-home Bible studies might frame their discussions in response to the Sunday morning sermon. The lectionary texts can be published in advance in church bulletins so members may prepare for upcoming sermons if they are so inclined.

If 1 Timothy 4:13 does enjoin public scripture reading, then Churches of Christ should restore it in

our worship. The lectionary is a ready resource to guide that enterprise.

Finally, there is the benefit (or consequence) of timeliness. If the lectionary is used consistently, a church will be focused on the birth of Christ at Christmas and on the resurrection at Easter, moving in-stream with the flow of Christendom at large. In short, lectionary usage may introduce our churches to ecumenism.

The most common objection to the lectionary is that it robs the preacher of the freedom to preach what he feels is most needful from week to week. But this argument is irrelevant in our tradition at least, because our ministers are free to ignore the lectionary any time they choose. But ministers should not be too quick to assume that their subjective judgments (often reactionary) better measure the needs of the people than the lectionary. In any case, many preachers find the lectionary liberating, not confining.

A more substantial objection is that the lectionary has its own biases and creates a canon within the canon. Even a three-year cycle cannot cover the Bible exhaustively, so if the lectionary is followed, there are passages that will never be addressed. This may be, but no other method ensures that every passage is proclaimed either. For Church of Christ ministers the lectionary may not offer our brotherhood's favorite texts as often as our people may expect to hear them. A Church of Christ preacher using the lectionary may be charged with preaching too often about Jesus, too much from the Old Testament, and not enough from Acts. He may be accused of having an "uncertain sound," of "speaking the language of Ashdod," of failing to preach "the truth," of being "denominational," and of being "ecumenical." This probably does reflect some of the values and biases of its creators. For instance, the 1992 revision added new texts about heroic women in response to the criticism of the previous edition's lack of material about women. While this was undoubtedly needful, it illustrates that the prevailing issues do affect the lectionary. The lectionary may foster a sort of canon within the canon; but then again, our historic preach-

ing probably has reflected a canon within the canon too. The question is whether the preacher is better equipped to preach the whole counsel of God with or without the lectionary.

A third criticism focuses on the internal dynamics of the lectionary. Sometimes thematic linkage is tenuous. A single word may be the only apparent link. In general, the Old Testament is made to do service to the New Testament by tracking its themes, which some criticize as exploitation of the Old Testament. The 1992 revision attempted to address this by introducing more continuously offered Old Testament material.

A fourth criticism is that the lectionary was designed for liturgical reading, not preaching. This is true, but usually matters very little because the texts furnish an adequate basis for sermonic development. There may be times the lectionary preacher must guard against stretching connections from the text. There may be periods when the lectionary texts become somewhat repetitive.

Finally, the lectionary does not lend itself particularly well to topical preaching. The preacher can certainly start with an idea or topic introduced in the lectionary passage and develop it as he may. That introduces the burden of responsibility to faithfully exegete any additional texts he may employ, but that responsibility reduces the need for topical preaching whether it originates in the lectionary or not. In any case, if there is a topic that needs treatment and the lectionary texts do not connect, the lectionary can be temporarily abandoned and then resumed later.

The lectionary is a tool to be used, not a master to be served. Recognizing certain shortcomings and problems that may accompany lectionary usage, there is much of potentially great benefit and value in its usage. The lectionary is deeply rooted in Jewish and Christian tradition, and deserves careful consideration in our fellowship today.

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